

Conversational implicature (I)



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Objectives and SLOs

Objectives

- 1) To discuss a third type of inference
- 2) To further impress students how pragmatics works

SLOs

- 1) Be able to define implicature
- 2) Be able to distinguish violation and flouting

Entailment and Presupposition reviewed

- Both entailment and presupposition are forms or levels of inference.
- Sentences entail or sentences have entailments, whereas
- Utterers presuppose or utterances or speakers have presuppositions.
- Sentences entail meanings, whereas utterances presuppose propositions.

Implicature as 3rd type of inference

- Under “implicature”, we look at a 3rd type of inferencing, and at how speakers co-operate in a conversation to achieve a shared meaning for utterances.

Nature of conversations

Pragmatics studies utterances or sentences naturally articulated by ordinary language users.

Conversations are larger discourse units than words and sentences, which were much explored in linguistics. Since pragmatics focuses on natural language (naturally occurring language as in dialogs) comprehension, it is just too natural for pragmaticians to turn to conversations.

Conversational studies

- Prior to conversation study, scholars focused on discourse units like words, phrases, and sentences, and discovered meanings in terms of entailment and presupposition.
- There are many discoveries in conversation studies. One of the inspiring findings is conversational implicature.

What is CI?

- By implicature, we mean what is implied. And by conversational implicature, we mean a meaning or message that is implicated in a conversation. When people oversay (or say more of) or undersay (say less of) something, they produce certain extra meaning or meanings beyond the literal meanings of words and sentences. This extra meaning is conversationally dependent, hence conversation implicature.
- Compared with entailment and presupposition, implicature is less ‘straightforward’ (Peccei, 1999/26)

- In a dialog, if speaker A asks speaker B “Are you going to John’s birthday party?” and speaker B says “I have heard Mary is going”, we may say that speaker B is implying something: he is meaning that Mary is a factor there to affect his decision of whether attending John’s party or not. If speaker knows well speaker B’s relationship with Mary and perhaps Mary with John, he certainly can conclude if speaker B will go or not. Therefore an implicature may also be seen as an indirect way of expressing oneself.

Implicatures in dialogs

(a) Virginia: Do you like my new hat?

Mary: It's pink!

(b) Maggie: Coffee?

James: It would keep me awake all night.

(c) Linda: Have you finished the student evaluation forms and reading lists?

Jean: I have done the reading lists.

(d) Phil: Are you going to Steve's barbecue?

Terry: Well, Steve's got those dogs now.

(e) Annie: Was the dessert any good?

Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.

Context provided by previous utterance lead to different implicature

(a) Virginia: Try the roast pork.

Mary: It's pink!

(b) Maggie: We went to see The Omen
last night but it wasn't very scary.

James: It would keep me awake all
night.

(c) Linda: You look very pleased with
yourself.

Jean: I've done the reading lists.

(d) Phil: His garden looks awful.

Terry: Well, Steve's got those dogs
now.

(e) Annie: I thought the pie would cheer
you up.

Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.

Herbert Paul Grice

- According to Herbert Paul Grice (1975), there are two kinds of conversation implicatures. One is generalized or conventional conversation implicature, the other is particularized conversation implicature.

- By generalized conversation implicature, it refers to an implicature whose meaning or meanings are inferable without anchoring it in specific contexts.

- In the utterance “John went into a house and found a tortoise in front of a door”, for instance, we may infer that John has gone into a house, which is not his. At least this is the implied meaning of the “a + noun” phrase.

- By particular conversation implicature, we refer to an implicature which is deductible only in specific contexts.

- Here is a typical example that will help to illustrate a particularized conversational implicature:
- A: Where is the fish?
- B: The cat looks very happy.

- Why does speaker B say things like this when speaker A asks him the question? What is the relationship between fish and cat? We all know that fish eats fish, and when a cat has fish, it feels satisfied. Speaker B says things this because he assumes that it is commonsensical that all cats eat fish and all cats look happy after eating fish, and that he understands that speaker A has this common sense.

- Conversation implicature was first discussed by Herbert Paul Grice in his William James Lectures at Harvard University in 1967. His lecture handouts were later openly printed and widely circulated in 1975.

Conversational principles

- One hallmark feature of pragmatics is to aim at analyses of larger linguistic units such as a conversation. This is of course derived from its commitment to the study of natural language comprehension. Hence pragmatics as natural language comprehension.

- Focuses on conversation analysis lead researchers to ask such simple but significant and never-asked questions: How can a conversation go on? What help interactants or people participating in a conversation keep a conversation on the track?
- In the talk, Grice went on by asserting that conversers in conversations may mutually understand each other's implicature and they do so by cooperating with one another. Hence the Cooperative Principle (CP).

- Maxim of quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Maxim of quantity: Make your contribution sufficiently informative for the current purpose of the conversation. Do not make your contribution more informative than is necessary.
- Maxim of relevance: Make sure that whatever you say is relevant to the conversation at hand.
- Maxim of clarity: Do not make your contribution obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand.

Violating vs. flouting

- Maxims are not always observed.
- People may either ‘quietly’ violating a maxim or ‘opening flouting a maxim.
- Violating is quiet in the sense that it is obvious at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately lied, supplied insufficient info, or been ambiguous, irrelevant or hard to understand.
- Violations might hamper communication but do not lead to implicature.

- Flouting leads to implicature; it is obvious to the hearer at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately and quite openly failed to observe one or more maxims. E.g.:
- “X has regularly and punctually attended all my classes. All his assignments were handed in on time and very neatly presented. I greatly enjoyed having X in my class.”

Summary

- Unlike entailments and presuppositions, implicature are inferences that cannot be made from isolated utterances. They are dependent on the context of the utterance and shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.
- Grice has proposed a way of analyzing implicatures based on the cooperative principle and its maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and clarity.

- In Grice's analysis, the speaker's flouting of a maxim combined with the hearer's assumption that the speaker has not really abandoned the cooperative principle leads to an implicature.

Consolidation Exercises

- 4.6 In each of the following decide whether the inference in brackets is a presupposition or an implicature derived from the underlined utterance.
- 4.7 In each case below decide which maxim has not been observed. Then decide whether this was a case of flouting or violation. Where you think there has been a case of flouting, what implicature might be drawn? Background info is given in square brackets.

- 4.10 Speakers often show they are aware of the cooperative principle when they use ‘hedges’ which indicate that they may be violating a maxim. What maxim is being alluded to in each case?